

Wilfred Harold Ramsden DCM MM (1889-1918)

**Carbonator,
Bottler,
Fiancée,
Son,
Brother,
Hero**



1

Birth and Parents

Wilfred Harold Ramsden was born on 8 September 1889, and was the ninth child born to Alfred and Elizabeth RAMSDEN. The couple had grown up in Lancashire, England and were married there on the 11 August 1866. Alfred was a labourer by trade and Elizabeth a milliner when they married. Their first six children were also born in England, with two dying in infancy.

In 1879 the young family emigrated to Victoria and would later live for a while in New Zealand before moving to Sydney in 1883 where Elizabeth did some casual work as a seamstress. Elizabeth Ramsden would have to endure a lot of pain and hardship in her life it would seem, as in 1885, her husband Alfred left her and their children behind in Sydney, to go to Melbourne. In late 1885 Elizabeth gave birth to her and Alfred's eighth child and was then on her own raising those children still at home, one child under 2 years old and a newborn. At this same time Elizabeth went with her children to Bowral, NSW (a town about two hours south of Sydney) and she and her daughter, presumably Emily Ann, set up a dressmaker's shop. According to

¹ This photo of Wilfred Harold Ramsden is an excerpt of a larger group photo: Wilfred Harold Ramsden and three mates. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial (PO7992.002). The full photo can be seen later in the biography.

testimony she would give in court at her husband's insolvency trial², Elizabeth and her daughter's business was so successful that they were able to take out a loan to build four shops in Bowral. One which became their dressmakers' shop and the rest which were rented out to other businesses.

During 1887, Elizabeth and her children moved to Melbourne and were seemingly reunited with Alfred. At this same time Alfred had established himself as a successful builder and contractor and on the 1 August 1888 the Oriental Coffee Palace, an establishment capable of sleeping 100 guests and of which was owned by Alfred, is officially opened.

O R I E N T A L C O F F E E P A L A C E,
VICTORIA-STREET WEST,
NORTH MELBOURNE.

Every Convenience and Accommodation for Visitors.

Five Minutes' Tram from Post Office.
Midway Between Elizabeth and Terrol Streets.

Accommodation over 100 Bedrooms.
A. RAMSDEN,
Proprietor.

1888 'Advertising', *The Age* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954), 10 August, p. 3. , viewed 23 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article196001188>

For the next two years advertisements appear in local Melbourne newspapers regularly promoting the facilities at the Oriental Coffee Palace and business seems to be going well. On the 8 September 1889, our hero Wilfred Harold Ramsden is born, the ninth child to Alfred and Elizabeth. Tragedy would again strike the family however on 2 October 1890, with the death at aged 22 of Alfred and Elizabeth's first-born child, Emily Anne Ramsden. She died having suffered for four months with broncho pneumonia, the same condition, that would ultimately take the life of her brother Wilfred in 1918.

The couple's tenth and last child, Catherine Emily is born in the beginning of 1891, but by the 29 October of the same year, Alfred Ramsden was declared insolvent by a court of law. Reports in the newspapers refer to a potential debt of between £2000

² 1892 'LAW REPORT.', *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957), 27 February, p. 10. , viewed 23 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article8403091>

to £3000, that Alfred owed to creditors in both New South Wales and Victoria. The records between Alfred's spectacular downfall in October 1891 and October 1897 don't record much detail except for a charge being brought against him for deserting his wife. He was remanded for eight days then released on his own recognisance for £10 bail³.

In 1901 Alfred Ramsden is again in trouble with the law as there is a warrant out for his arrest in South Australia, where he has been seen in Adelaide. He was again in trouble for not supporting his wife and two youngest children, Wilfred and Caroline, who are now nearly 12 years and 10 years old respectively.⁴

Elizabeth Ramsden was to continue to struggle to provide for her youngest children while her husband Alfred kept evading his obligations to provide for his wife and children. In January 1911 a report by the New South Wales Police⁵ had Alfred being on the run in NSW having escaped from an asylum in Victoria. Elizabeth was now living in Perth, Western Australia. She would in 1919, claim to the Department of Defence that her husband was dead⁶, but in fact Alfred did not die until 1923⁷. Presumably by 1919, Elizabeth had lost faith in her husband's fathering skills, and considered him dead, but this is speculation.

Early Life

Wilfred's early life and example would have been strongly influenced by the indefatigable attitude of his mother Elizabeth Ramsden. As Wilfred reached his first birthday, Elizabeth had then lost three children, two in infancy and one daughter aged 22. She lived a life of hard work, constantly moving home to different states and even countries. She did this amidst running, at different times, a successful sewing business, boarding houses and coffee shops whilst her husband Alfred went on periods of abscondment leaving Elizabeth to care for their children alone. Wilfred would have grown up seeing a strong woman and taking on that example of strength in his own life. This would later show most admirably in his service to King and Country in World War I, when amongst other examples he would be injured on three different occasions and remain on duty.

³ 1897 'NEWS AND NOTES.', *The West Australian* (Perth, WA : 1879 - 1954), 7 October, p. 4. , viewed 23 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article3185326>

⁴ 1901 'POLICE COURTS.', *The Register* (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929), 16 July, p. 3. , viewed 23 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article56639122>

⁵ 1911 'Missing Friends.', *New South Wales Police Gazette and Weekly Record of Crime* (Sydney : 1860 - 1930), 25 January, p. 42. , viewed 24 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article251649999>

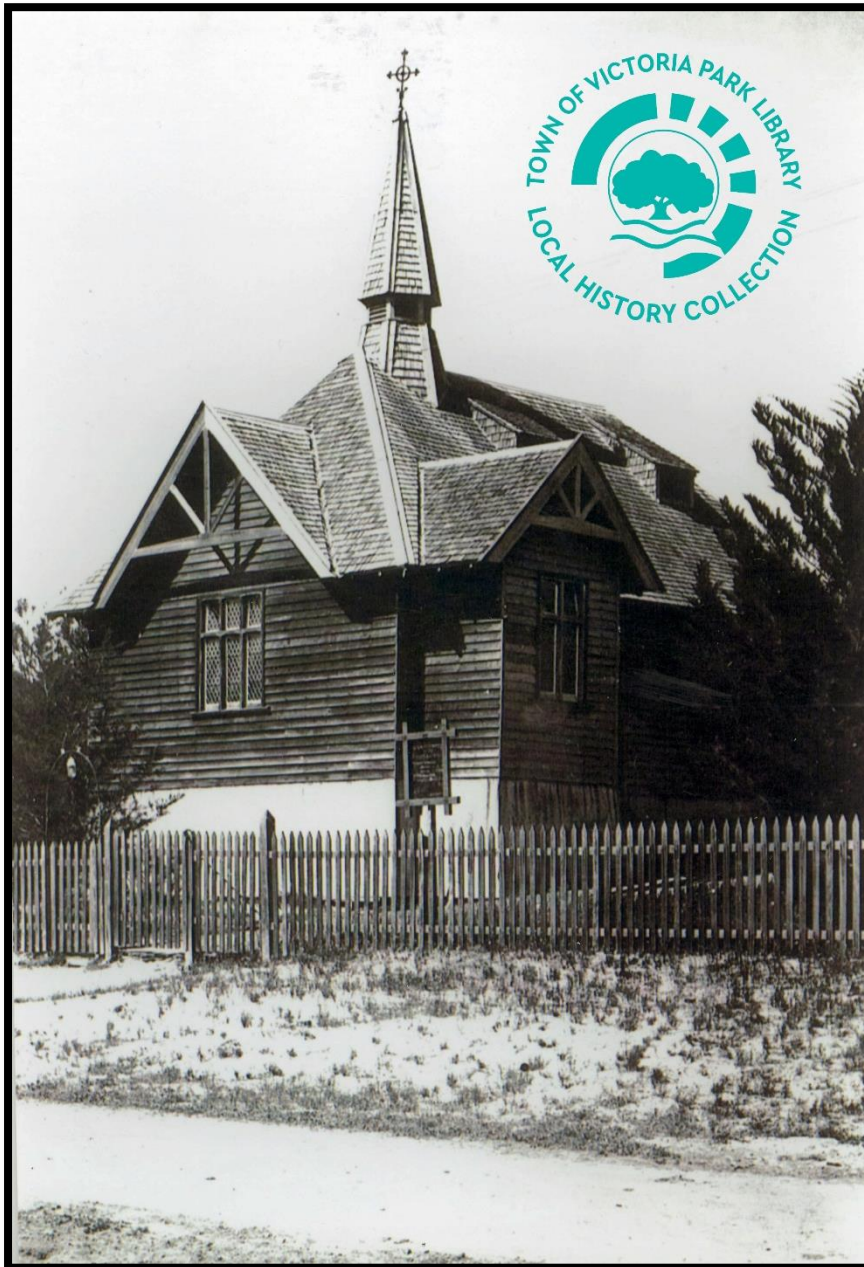
⁶ Elizabeth Ramsden's letter to Base Records, Melbourne dated 24/06/1919, "my son....was unmarried and my husband is not alive", p. 85 of Corporal Wilfred Harold Ramsden's Service Record, National Archives of Australia, NAA: B2455, Barcode: 8069896.

⁷ Victoria Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Death registration for Alfred Ramsden, 1923, Reg. No.: 11419.

Wilfred would spend his early life in Melbourne, not moving to Western Australia till it appears his mother established a boarding house in Kalgoorlie around 1903. By 1906, Elizabeth and her family have moved to Perth, Wilfred is by this time 17 years old.

Life in Victoria Park

Wilfred lived with his mother and youngest sister at 62 Leake Street (now Carnarvon Street), East Victoria Park. Wilfred was a Bottler and Carbonater by profession and was President of the Brewery Employees' Union for a time prior to enlisting in World War I. The family attended the Church of the Transfiguration, Victoria Park (now St Peter's Anglican Church) and Wilfred's youngest sister Caroline was married there also.



Church of the Transfiguration, Victoria Park, circa 1914.

Local History Collection, Town of Victoria Park Library Service

Engagement

*"Dear is the memory he left behind,
Of a life that was manly, true and kind
Inserted by his loving fiancé, Marie Calvin"⁸*

These are the words that conclude Marie's notice in the 'Killed in Action' section of the *West Australian* just a few days after she and Wilfred's family would have received notice of his death.

But who was Marie Calvin? From research undertaken, it seems that the Calvin and Ramsden families were very close, and that Wilfred and Marie would have lived close to each other at least from their teenage years and onwards. Both Marie and her sister Janet Calvin were bridesmaids at the wedding of Caroline Ramsden to Edward Massey. Caroline Ramsden, being of course Wilfred's youngest sibling. Wilfred was also best man at the wedding, standing up for his friend Edward. The records do not show when Marie and Wilfred became engaged, but undoubtedly, the thought of her own wedding day would not have been far from Marie's mind on such an occasion. Marie's sister Janet Calvin would go on to marry Wilfred's oldest brother Philip after the war, so the family ties must have always been strong.

War Service

Wilfred Ramsden enlisted for service in World War I on 8 September 1915 and was assigned to the 13th Field Ambulance Brigade, he sailed for Egypt in November 1915, fought through Mesopotamia, was injured, and sent to England and then to France. After fighting 12 months in France Wilfred was wounded but remained on duty.

A letter written from Wilfred whilst on service in Egypt, to a friend and president of the Brewery Employee' Union, George Kerr, was published in the *Westralian Worker* in May 1916. In the letter Wilfred gives some insights into the off-duty side of life of a soldier in the war, a side not always seen:

*"Letters from Egypt.
BREWERY EMPLOYEES' EXPERIENCES.*

"George Kerr has received some interesting letters from two members of the Brewery Employees' Union, W. H. Ramsden, late president of the union, and W. R. Kelly, and we print here with a few excerpts:

⁸ 1918 'Family Notices', *The West Australian* (Perth, WA : 1879 - 1954), 23 November, p. 1. , viewed 27 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article27496780>

"Mr. Ramsden says that he has been transferred to a N.S.W. Light Horse Regiment and is separated from his old W.A. company. A letter from any of the brewery boys, he says, would be highly appreciated by him, also a "Worker" would be a luxury. While encamped at Moodi, which is considered the most European suburb of Cairo a concert was given by the civilian residents and was attended by about two dozen European ladies and 800 soldiers. There are a large number of Turkish prisoners at Moodi.

"Mr. Ramsden is a close observer of men and things, and he writes in an interesting strain about many things he sees. He met Harry Harvey, formerly a timber worker, but now a corporal in the 58th Battalion at Heliopolis. There have been plenty of sports, including football, and some exciting games have been played. A sports meeting was arranged, with a good programme, including running, tug-of-war, bicycle race, horse race, and wagon driving competition. There was a big crowd, including the hospital nurses. "Two of us " says Billy, "concluded the day's outing by frying five eggs apiece, which, with a billy of cocoa and bread and butter provided an excellent supper. "He met Ginger Connell, who is in the remount dept.

Most of the villages around Cairo are filthy and malodorous, the shops and business places being situated in lanes not wider than W.A. footpaths; the shops and tenements being depressingly dark and poky. The dress of the inhabitants is in perfect harmony with the general appearance of the villages. At about seven miles from Moodi is the petrified forest, and Mr. Ramsden says that it is wonderful to see hundreds of what were once trees lying on the ground, with even the grain and knots showing. Yet they are turned into solid stone, though they could be easily mistaken for logs and stumps. Mr. Ramsden has had a good many swims in the Suez Canal, and on one occasion swam to the other bank – a distance of about 125 yards. He discovered a dead Jacko (Turk), fully dressed and half buried, and a few bullets from his bandolier form a memento of the writer's first season in Egypt. At the time of writing the warm weather was beginning to set in and the flies, especially of the sand variety, were starting to make themselves pests—they are very trying to both men and horses.

"Mr. Ramsden relates that some of the boys back from Gallipoli have some arousing stories to tell. One of them upon being informed by the doctor that he could not cure him of some sores which had broken out on his body, exclaimed scornfully:—"It's my belief you couldn't cure a ham'."

"Mr. Kelly writes that he received photo of the send-off in Perth and thinks it very good. He has also received some "Workers." in which he always finds

*interesting news. He met Joe Pender. Pody. and Billy Comery in Cairo; they looked good and had only one complaint to make, namely that the hops were not so good in Egypt as the old Swan beer. "It is very warm here now," continues Mr. Kelly, "but we are very lucky, for the time at least, for we are doing guard duty on the canal and can hop in and have a dip as we please. We see a fair number of boats passing through the canal, and it does us good to see a ship with English people on board. It sometimes makes us wish it was taking us back to W.A., but I don't want to return until we have helped to settle everything over this part of the world. I see by the papers that recruiting is going on fairly well in the West, and I am glad, for I really think we will want everyone who is fit and well. Give the boys at the Swan my best regards. Must now close with best regards to you, George, and best wishes for the success of the union and the workers in general."*⁹

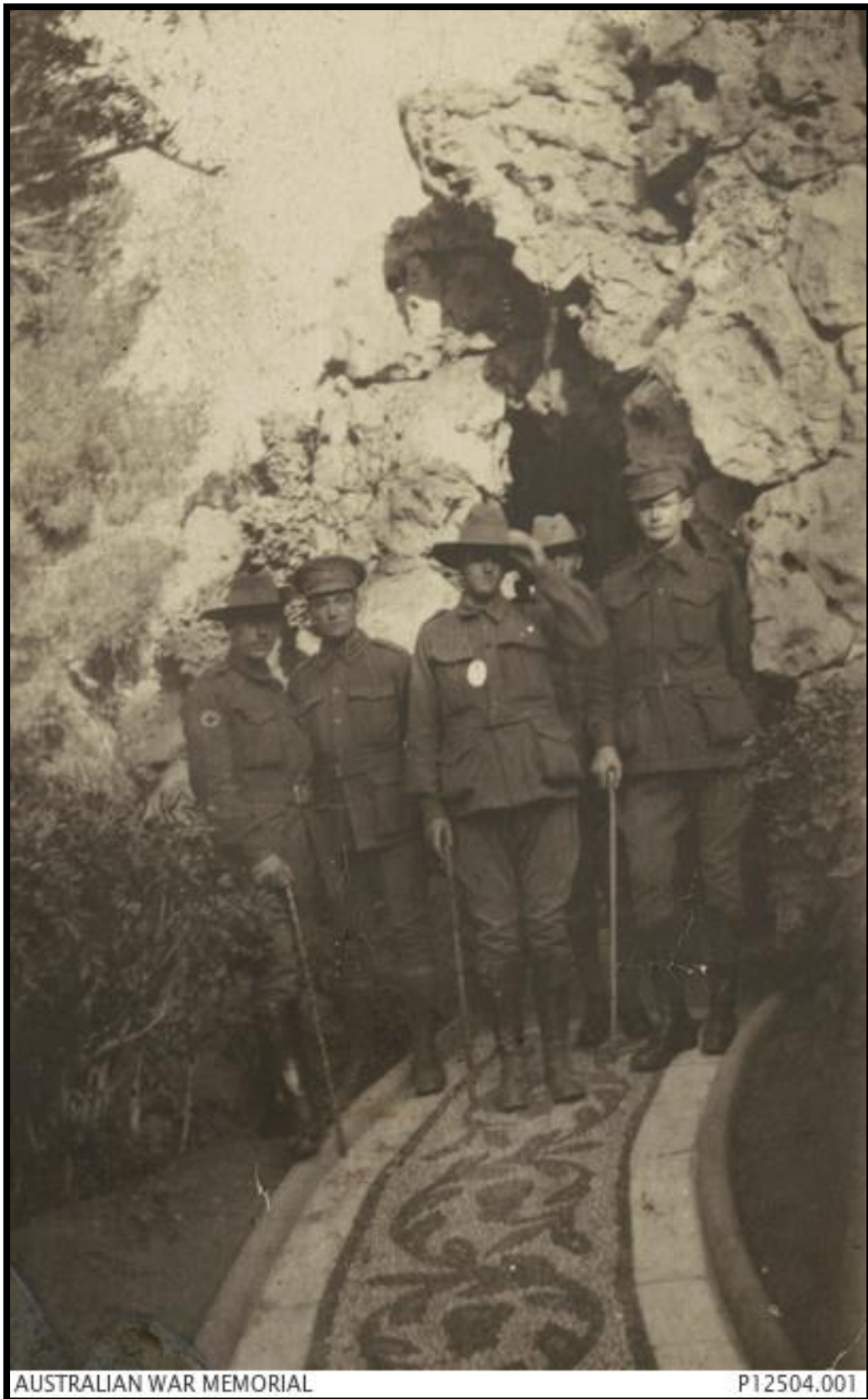
In March 1917 Wilfred was promoted to Bombardier and transferred to the 113th Howitzer Battery, in November 1917 he was severely gassed and sent to England. Later Wilfred entered the Army Signal School at Dunstable, England, and gained his first-class instructor's certificate. Wilfred again returned to France, and on the 1 January 1918, Wilfred was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal ¹⁰ "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He was one of a forward observation party in an attack which suffered several casualties. When his officer was wounded he dressed his wounds, and, though wounded himself went forward with another officer in the attack. He remained at duty throughout the day repairing and maintaining lines under very heavy fire. He showed splendid courage and determination".¹¹

⁹ 1916 'Letters from Egypt.', *Westralian Worker* (Perth, WA : 1900 - 1951), 19 May, p. 5. , viewed 22 Sep 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article148343092>

¹⁰ "The Distinguished Conduct Medal was a decoration established in 1854 by Queen Victoria for gallantry in the field by other ranks of the British Army. It is the oldest British award for gallantry and was a second level military decoration, ranking below the Victoria Cross, until it was discontinued in 1993 when it was replaced by the Conspicuous Gallantry Cross. The medal was also awarded to non-commissioned military personnel of other Commonwealth Dominions and Colonies." Wikipedia contributors, 2023, 'Distinguished Conduct Medal' in Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, Retrieved 15:08, October 24, 2023, from

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Distinguished_Conduct_Medal&oldid=1162289589

¹¹ Citation for Corporal Wilfred Harold Ramsden, Distinguished Conduct Medal, *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 137, 30 August 1918.



Informal group portrait of four soldiers, Wilfred Harold Ramsden is pictured second from left.

Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial (P12504.001)



Outdoor portrait of five members of the AIF camp prior to leaving England for the Western Front, 8 September 1916.

Wilfred is fourth from the left in the photograph.
Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial (P07992.003).



Left: Wilfred Harold Ramsden and three mates.

Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial (P07992.002)



Example of a Distinguished Conduct Medal awarded during World War I and the reign of King George V (1910-1936). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

In June 1918 Wilfred was gassed a second time. September 1918 saw him wounded again, and for the third time Wilfred chose to remain on duty. On 4 October 1918 he was promoted from Bombardier to Temporary Corporal. Later in the month, Wilfred suffered a gunshot wound to his right hand and was sent to the 1st General Hospital in Étretat, France, where he suffered from broncho pneumonia, no doubt brought on by a weakening of his lungs in the gas attacks. Wilfred succumbed to his wounds and died on the 9 November 1918. He was buried in Étretat Churchyard Extension, Étretat, France.¹²



Example of a Military Medal awarded during WWI. Courtesy of Imperial War Museums, UK

¹² Row III, Grave D9.

Wilfred was posthumously awarded the Military Medal on the 24 January 1919. The citation for this award is as follows: 'In front of HAMEL - VILLERS BRETONNEUX. On the 9th August 1918, Bombardier RAMSDEN was in charge of specialists accompanying the F.O.O. At considerable risk from machine gun and shell fire, he crossed an area in full view of the enemy, and succeeded in establishing communication with his Battery. the telephone line was cut on several occasions, on each of which this N.C.O., without hesitation went out and effected the necessary repairs. By his efforts, at great personal risk, on account of severe machine gun and shell fire, he enabled the F.O.O. to be in almost constant touch with his Battery and thus to support the Infantry at a time when Artillery fire was most required. This N.C.O.'s total disregard of danger, devotion to duty and excellent example are deserving of special recognition.'¹³



Étretat Churchyard Extension, Étretat, France.

Courtesy of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

¹³ Citation for Corporal Wilfred Harold Ramsden, Military Medal, *Commonwealth Gazette*, No. 61, 23 May 1919.



PH00048-01 Gravestone of W. H. Ramsden, Étretat Churchyard Extension, Étretat, France, row 3, D 9. Donated by The War Graves Photographic Project (Facebook). Local History Collection. Town of Victoria Park Library Service.

Legacy

With Wilfred's death in 1918, his mother had lost five of her ten children whilst she still lived, and that, outliving a child, is a terrible burden for a parent. How Elizabeth must have grieved every lost child, but five would have been a heavy burden indeed. Thankfully she would be spared the death of her sixth child, when she died in February 1933. The sixth child of Elizabeth, and our hero Wilfred's brother, Richard RAMSDEN died horrifically by his own hand¹⁴ near Kalgoorlie on 24 November 1933.

Following Wilfred's death, his fiancé, Marie Calvin, would in a loving public statement of her grief and loss, regularly insert memorial notices in local newspapers until 1930, when the last of them simply says:

"IN MEMORIAM.

Anzac Hero.

RAMSDEN. — In loving memory of Corporal W. H. Ramsden, D.C.M., M.M., who died in France, November 9, 1918. Fond memories cling.

*Inserted by Ri. _____*¹⁵

'Ri' it would seem being an affectionate name that Wilfred had for his fiancé. Marie would later marry at the age of 46 to Edward Lawson in Sydney, the rest of her story is unknown.

A living legacy and tribute to their beloved Will, as Wilfred was affectionately known to his loved ones, was the birth of two children. One of Wilfred's nieces was named in honour of Marie, his fiancé. Marie Calvin Ramsden was born on 4 March 1924 to Wilfred's oldest brother Phillip, and Marie's sister Janet RAMSDEN (nee CALVIN). A nephew, Wilfred Hugh MASSEY was born rather fittingly on the first Remembrance Day after his uncle's death, the 11 November 1919. He was born in Victoria Park, WA to Wilfred's good friend Edward Massey and Wilfred's youngest sister, Caroline Massey (nee Ramsden).

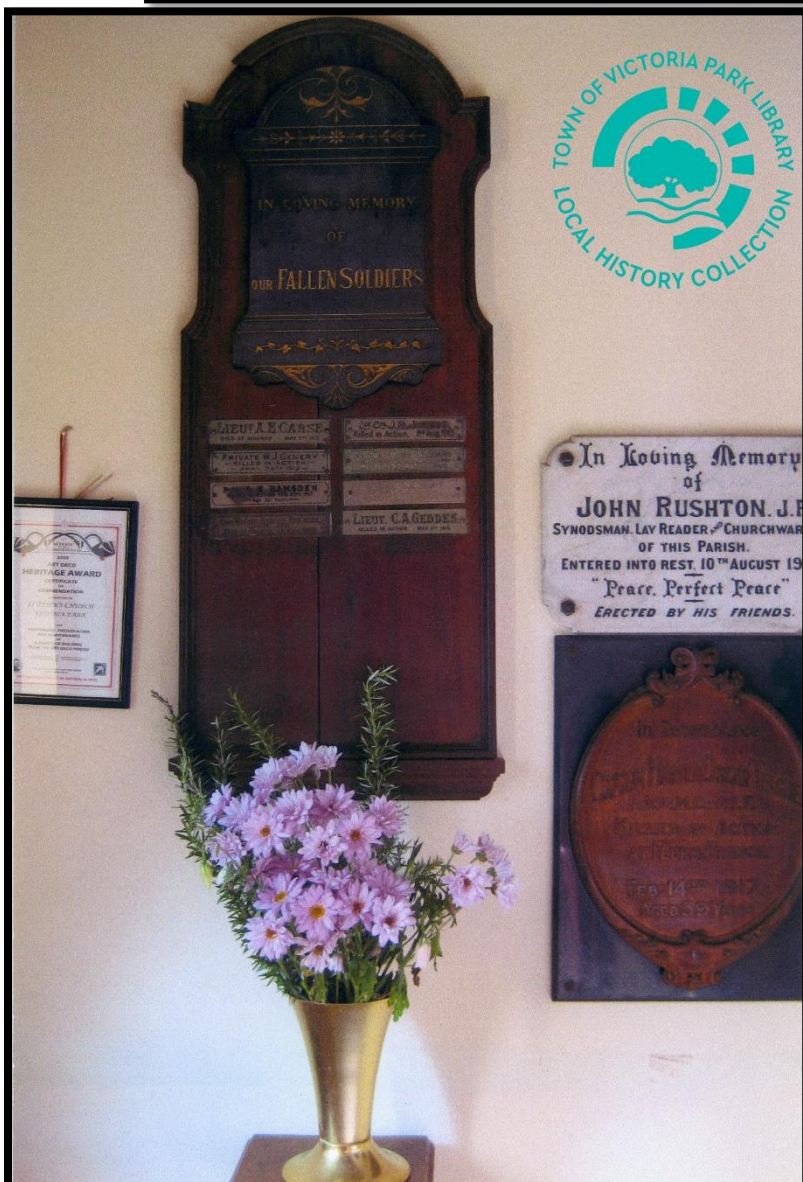
A memorial plaque hangs on the Honour Board of the Church of the Transfiguration, now St Peter's Anglican Church, Victoria Park. As does a plaque for Wilfred's brother Albert Edward John Ramsden, who was Killed in Action on the Somme, France in 1917.

¹⁴ Richard Ramsden, the coroner found, had strapped explosives to his head, and died by them exploding. His body was only identifiable by his clothes. Richard's clothes were recognised by his oldest brother Phillip RAMSDEN at Kalgoorlie Police Station. Joseph's body was found headless and handless by a campfire. Joseph had been previously treated on several occasions for mental distress. 1933 'ITEMS OF NEWS', Western Argus (Kalgoorlie, WA : 1916 - 1938), 5 December, p. 12. , viewed 31 Oct 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article34625890>

¹⁵ 1930 'Family Notices', The West Australian (Perth, WA : 1879 - 1954), 8 November, p. 1. , viewed 03 May 2023, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article33229138>



Above:
Honour Roll, St Peter's Church, name plates – Private A. E. Ramsden and Corporal W. H. Ramsden (PH00009-02).
Local History Collection, Town of Victoria Park Library Service



Left:
World War I Honour Roll, St Peter's Church, 2007 (PH00009-01).
Local History Collection, Town of Victoria Park Library Service.

Five of Wilfred's nephews are known to have served in World War II, with one, Richard Ramsden (1920-1943) being taken a Prisoner of War in Timor and dying of illness in Burma.



Ramsden Avenue sign, East Victoria Park, 1 December 2020.

Local History Collection, Town of Victoria Park Library Service.

In perpetual tribute, Ramsden Avenue in East Victoria Park is named in honour of Corporal Wilfred Harold RAMSDEN DCM MM. May his patriotism, courage and valour be forever remembered as they are an example to be emulated and treasured by all the citizens of Victoria Park and beyond.

Lest We Forget.

Family Tree

Alfred RAMSDEN and Elizabeth (nee SPARNON)

Born (Alfred): 11 August 1847, Salford, Lancashire, England

Born (Elizabeth): 1848, Ulverston, Lancashire, England

Married: 11 August 1866, Dalton-In-Furness, Lancashire, England.

Died (Alfred): 9 August 1923, Melbourne, Victoria

Died (Elizabeth): 9 February 1933, Perth, Western Australia

Children:

- Emily Ann RAMSDEN, b. c.1868, Lancashire, England, d. 2 October 1890, Melbourne, Victoria.
- Jane RAMSDEN, b. and d. 1869, Ulverston, Lancashire, England.
- Elizabeth Jane RAMSDEN, b. 16 November 1870, Ireleth, Lancashire, England, d. 1872, Lancashire, England.
- Phillip Alfred RAMSDEN, b. 28 September 1873, Barrow-In-Furness, Lancashire, England, d. 8 November 1953, Coolgardie, Western Australia.
 - Emigrated to Australia: Arrived 16 November 1899, Sydney, NSW
 - Married: Janet CALVIN, 12 March 1919, Perth, Western Australia
 - Children:
 - Richard Ramsden, b. 26 June 1920, Perth, WA, served in WWII (WX14461) and became a POW, d. 29 October 1943, from illness, Burma.
 - Marie Calvin Ramsden, b. 4 March 1924, Perth, WA
 - Joseph Charles Ramsden, b. 7 November 1925, Perth, WA, Enlisted in the RAAF in WWII, 11 December 1943 (Leading Aircraftman 84065), d. 6 December 1995, Osborne Park, WA.
 - Janet Ramsden, b. 15 March 1929, Perth, WA
- Grace RAMSDEN, b. May 1875, Lancashire, England
- Richard RAMSDEN, b. 1877, Lancashire, England, d. 24 November 1933, Coolgardie, WA
- Joseph Sparnon RAMSDEN, b. 23 May 1884, Mudgee, NSW.
- Albert Edward John RAMSDEN, b. 14 November 1885, Sydney, NSW, d. 25 February 1917, Killed in Action, Bapaume, Somme Sector, France.
 - Married: Margaret Florence McCOY (b. 1891, Perth, WA)
 - Children:
 - Wilfred George Ramsden, b. 20 December 1910, Perth, WA, d. 1978, Perth, WA. Served WWII, reaching rank of Sergeant (WX31222).
 - Margaret Caroline (Girlie) Ramsden, b. 1913, Perth, WA, m. 1942 to Archibald John NORTH, Melbourne, Victoria, d. 1985, Melbourne, Victoria.
- **Wilfred Harold RAMSDEN DCM MM**, b. 8 September 1889, Elsternwick, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Engaged to Marie Calvin; d. 9 November 1918 of wounds and broncho pneumonia, France.
- Catherine Emily Caroline (Dolly) RAMSDEN: b. 24 April 1891, Hotham, Melbourne, Victoria, d. 24 March 2016, Perth, WA
 - Married: Edward James Charles MASSEY (b. 2 February 1891, Broken Hill, NSW, d. 16 November 1958, Perth WA.) Served in WWI (7268), last rank: Private.
 - Children:
 - Dorothy Jean MASSEY, b. 23 June 1916, Perth, WA, d. 7 February 1985, Broome, WA
 - Wilfred "Bon" Hugh MASSEY, b. 11 November 1919, Victoria Park, Perth, WA, d. 28 June 1982, Thornlie, Perth, WA. Served in WWII (W55102), last rank: Private.
 - Grace Emily MASSEY, b. 18 November 1920, Perth, WA, d. 17 October 1999, Perth, WA
 - Edward MASSEY, b. 14 December 1922, Perth, WA, d. 2009
 - Hugh "Hughie" Alfred MASSEY, b. 22 April 1924, Subiaco, Perth, WA, d. 30 July 2002, Waterford, WA. Served in WWII (WX39453), last rank: Lance Corporal.
 - Annetta MASSEY, b. 5 February 1927, Perth, WA, d. 29 September 1986, Perth, WA
 - Gladys "Lal" MASSEY, b. 5 June 1929, d. 2016.

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Corporal Wilfred Harold Ramsden DCM MM was especially commemorated at the Town's Remembrance Day service in Memorial Gardens, Albany Highway, on 11 November 2023.

A copy of the commemorative booklet from the occasion is available from the Town of Victoria Park Library.